

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

The Dilemma of the Perception of the Strong State in Russia and the Demand for Modernization

Kangaspuro, Markku Veli

Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group
2016

Kangaspuro , M V 2016 , The Dilemma of the Perception of the Strong State in Russia and the Demand for Modernization . in V Gel'man (ed.) , Authoritarian Modernization in Russia : Ideas, Institutions, and Policies . Studies in Contemporary Russia , Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group , Abingdon , pp. 39-54 . <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315568423-10>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/313067>

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315568423-10>

unspecified

acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

The Dilemma of the Perception of the Strong State of Russia and the Demand for Modernization

Markku Kangaspuro

The discussion of the perception of the strong state of Russia is not a discussion about a democratic and authoritarian regime or whether people endorse this or that type of regime more. The normative assumption in the past has been that Russia's transformation has followed theories of democratization, which led us to have misleading expectations of the direction it would follow and consequently of the methods which Russia's regime would use to consolidate its power. This consolidation is common object of all types of regime, notwithstanding whether they are undemocratic or democratic. Rulers aim to increase the support and consent of their subjects: only the methods vary. In this respect we are not speaking about failed attempts of Russia's regime to promote democracy, but about the instruments it has successfully used to gain popular support.

Russia has commonly been defined as an electoral authoritarian regime (Diamond, 2002: 22) but it is not essential for to precisely define Russia's political system in this chapter. We are interested in the methods which Russia's regime uses to secure public endorsement by its subjects. In this respect, the key word of this chapter is the "strong state". Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro remind us that democracy is not the only method used by regimes to gain subjects' consent. An authoritarian regime is also able to consolidate its power if it 'holds firmly to an undemocratic course and offers appropriate sticks and carrots to induce support, then subjects will learn to support what the new regime supplies' (Rose et al., 2011: 69). This notion is appropriate in Russia's case. The concept of a "strong state" includes both symbolic and material supply by the regime on the one hand, and demands by the subjects on the other. This dynamism keeps the perception of the strong state fluid and reproduces conflicting mass perceptions of the state. My claim is that the regime's supply of a strong state has often been more symbolic (political) than material, and does not meet the predominant material (welfare state) demands of the population.

The perception of Russia's strong state is usually drawn from an interpretation of Russia's unique history caused by a particular type of state formation. Andrei Tsygankov's definition of features of the state represents typical reasoning on Russia. His interpretation relies on the civilizational approach of Russia's uniqueness. Tsygankov sees Russia, on the one hand, as an Orthodox state, the ethos of which is to protect its subjects from the arbitrariness of the upper and privileged strata of society. On the other hand, he sees her as a country which has a unique place in the world as a semi-peripheral great power whose rulers easily sacrifice their obligations to the people in order to maintain this status against considered external threats (Tsygankov, 2015: 5). Continuing this interpretation, military might, imperial power and capacity to defend the country against foreign foes have turned finally into the end goals of state policy. This legacy is seen as an obstacle for Russia's European developmental path. Tsygankov's analysis comes close to the explanations of path dependency when he defines the reasons for Russia's unique development: 'national political culture, the need to have a combat ready army and the need to mobilize public resources for accelerated economic growth' (Tsygankov, 2015: 5-6).

Although not agreeing with the path dependency approach, it is easy to agree with the assumption that for historical reasons, Russian identity is closely tied to an imperial state identity (not ethnic identity) and to the concept of the strong state. Therefore, the

common perception of state is a significant variable in understanding Russia's development. The essential feature of Russian identity-building has been that it is based on the state's priority over the citizens' rights, which is usually justified by the above-mentioned reasons and the argument about the underdevelopment of civil society. Vera Tolz points out that the Soviet and pre-revolution tradition of Russia was to forge national unity using the strong role of the state. This was also followed by the rulers of the new Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They soon turned to the idea to give the state the supreme role in the nation-building project. This idea leads back to history and its consequence has been state patriotism, the essence of which is that people's unity has been forged through loyalty to the tsar or president and pride in serving a strong state (Tolz, 2001: 256). In this respect, the idea of the strong state encompasses an emphasis on symbolic markers of state might.

Tolz points out that Russia's imperial type of state before and after 1917 has had profound consequences for the Russian understanding of the state. 'When in 1917 it turned out that Russian nation (as an empire) with a strong state did not exist, many were devastated'. In 1917, Bolshevik policy served to restore that state as well as the perceived role of the Communists before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia's patriotism is based on the multicultural and multiethnic state defined by state borders and its leadership. That makes the state and its symbols the primary target of loyalty, instead of citizens with the same ethnicity and/or language and sharing a common culture and geographical economic area with equal rights and responsibilities. Tolz claims that Russia's phenomenon as an empire and intention to protect its unity at any cost have made many Russians since the nineteenth century condemn nationalism and use instead the word "national" (*natsionalnyi*) in a positive sense when describing their debate over nationality and the borders of their homeland. 'When they talked about the Russian empire they thought they were talking about the Russian nation-state' (Tolz, 2001: 17-18, 256).

In general, symbolic markers have a significant role in all societies, and in Russia they are crucial in constructing the image of a strong state that, in turn, is an essential part of state identity, reproducing citizens' loyalty to the power. In this respect, a common understanding of the state's unique past reproduces the belief in Russia's particularism and distinctiveness. This idea has a long history in Russia, going back to nineteenth-century discussions. In the Soviet Union, the political tendency that promoted Russian nationalism and statism complemented by the conviction of particularism was called *gosudarstvennichestvo* (statism). It also gained strength within the Soviet establishment in the 1960s-1970s (Duncan, 2000: 77). Applying the idea of a strong Russian state, the discussion easily ends up at the conclusion that Russia's path to modernization is not comparable with others', thus impeding attempts to extend the scope of discussions from a "narrow" to a "broader" type of modernization.

One significant feature of the Russian state system back through history has been the quite unchangeable dominant role of the state service class as the ruling class. The nobility's status and property were subjugated to the emperor, who also nominated the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, the peasantry and independent bourgeoisie/middle class have always been weak. From Soviet times to recently, the state officialdom has been the backbone of the state system. At the same time, they have also been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the current politico-economic system, while business as well as a large proportion of blue-collar workers and the middle class are dependent on state-owned companies and state servants.

No wonder that modernization was conducted in top-down manner, ranging from “modernization” through administration methods from the reforms of Peter the Great to the *Plan Putina*, the modernization of Russia in the twenty-first century. Lessons from the Great Reforms of Alexander II (such as the emancipation of the serfs in 1861) and Sergei Witte’s reforms in the 1890s are all interlinked to rulers’ stern reluctance to carry out broader societal and political modernization. The ideas of democratization: liberal reforms and constitutional development, advocated by the kadets,¹ did not gain the strength to be realized. The Minister of Finance, Sergei Witte, led Russia to the path of narrow modernization, emphasising industrial development, foreign investments and the rapid growth of the economy. The Crimean War also turned Russian public opinion away from Europe towards the idea of a unique Russian civilization with special ties and responsibility towards the Slavic world (Duncan, 2000: 31), resembling somehow the discussions in Russia during the past decade.

The Strong State: Material and Symbolic Dimensions

In this chapter, the strong state is not taken as a fact but as a socially constructed perception of the population. The question is not about the *de facto* existing state but about how people’s symbolic and material demands on the strong state frame their perceptions of state, and how these two levels of expectations interact, interlink and also contradict each other. It is revealing that in 2010 Russians were almost equally divided when responding to the question of whether they perceived Russia as a strong or weak state: 44 per cent of respondents perceived Russia to be really strong or quite strong, and 44 per cent very weak or quite weak (Levada-Center, 2010a). Opinions are divided, but after that the crucial question is what qualities people assign to the strong state and which features make people define the state as weak.

The second question is how symbolic and material demands interact on the level of agency and structure. This allows us to put forward the following question: what are the consequences of symbolic demands for the strong state on the institutional level when state leaders meet citizens’ material demands for a strong welfare state? Here the question of the intended and unintended consequences of these demands and the leadership’s response to them also comes into the picture. In this chapter, the latter question is only touched upon but not analysed in detail, inasmuch as its focus is on the analysis of the Levada-Center’s mass surveys concerning respondents’ answers to questions related to the strong state. The four variables used in the analytical framework in studying the dilemma of the demand for a strong state and the demand for modernization is presented in Figure 1 below.

[Figure 1 is here]

My presumption is that Russians’ political attitudes evolved during the past two decades and the popular perception of the necessity of a strong state has established a normative frame for political decision-making and in a broader sense for choices directing the development of society. The reason why this matters is that even the most authoritarian societies have to take into account public opinion and reproduce

¹ The Constitutional Democratic Party

the consent of the people, at least among a reasonable proportion of the population.² In this respect, the prevailing values and norms are important. Until the Ukrainian crisis and the murder of Boris Nemtsov, Russia was generally perceived as having one of those “electoral authoritarian” regimes which legitimize a regime’s power mostly by other means than repression (Sakwa, 2011: xiv; Diamond, 2002: 22), although after Nemtsov’s assassination, some analysts reconsidered their assessment and suggested that it was a turning point in the Kremlin’s politics towards its rivals (Gel’man, 2015: 2). Notwithstanding the extent to which it has been a turning point towards more severe ruling methods or something else, the essential point is that rulers cannot escape from responding to popular demands.

In this chapter, Russians’ expectation of the strong state’s role is drawn from three major aspects: (1) demand for an overarching welfare state; (2) narration of a glorious state history; and (3) Russia’s strong position in the international community. These aspects also establish part of the framework for constructing Russia’s state identity. The significance of these factors has gained more weight since the recent Ukrainian crisis and the government’s diminished capacity to meet the material demands of the population. We can assume that citizens’ material demands for a strong state will increasingly come into conflict with the state’s capacity to meet them. This leads to the question, to what extent and how successfully has the regime increased the symbolic supply of a strong state to compensate for its diminished capacity of material supply, and what has been (and is expected to be) citizens’ response to that.

Why is the concept of the strong state worth studying and what is its relation to the modernization of Russia? Ideas establish an essential part of the political culture and common value system of all societies, and in this respect they establish a framework which directs political choices. Agents make choices relatively independently within the institutions and as part of power relations. By drawing on this, we can also discuss the preconditions of choices. My assumption is that Russians’ common conviction about the necessity of a strong state brings up several aspects which tend to keep Russia within the limits of a narrow path of modernization and marginalize the demands of the liberals for a broader modernization.

The Welfare State

Russia’s dominant feature is the patriarchal welfare model inherited from the Soviet Union. Russians expect that the state will take care of their life, ranging from decent living standards and housing to health care. This is partly the result of the fact that Russia has not been able to change the model of its welfare system in a consistent way. There are several parallel systems in health care and social services combining private, state, local (municipal) and third sector services (Cook, 2007: 239, 241-243). The Levada-Center’s nationwide surveys show clearly that the government is expected to take comprehensive care of the people. From 2001 to 2010, a large majority of respondents, from 64 to 68 per cent, answered that society should be built on the idea that power take care of the people instead of a system based on popular demand for fulfilling basic conditions (Levada-Center, 2010c). This is a telling

² Larry Diamond noted: ‘Virtually all hybrid regimes in the world today are quite deliberately pseudodemocratic, in that the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often, in part, to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination’ (Diamond, 2002: 24).

example of the conviction that in the end, the state knows the basic conditions of citizens and the state-society relation is constructed accordingly on a top-down basis.

[Figure 2 is here]

It has been the unchangeable expectation of Russians that the state is an integral part of people's life and that they cannot live without the state's care (Levada-Center, 2010b). In general, there is strong support for the idea that the state should use more money for improving people's living standards (67%) and health care (55%) and protecting people in a socially vulnerable position (52%). Innovation and modernization were mentioned by only 14 per cent of respondents. Symbolic performances to gain international respect and reputation – the Olympics in Sochi, Universiada in Kazan and the coming Football World Cup – were unpopular (5%). Support for the allocation of money to these symbolic events signifying the strong state had halved since 2010 (Levada-Center, 2015j).

The situation becomes critically contradictory when the discussion turns to budget cuts in order to allocate money to traditional symbolic objects of the strong state. The majority of Russians opposed the government's decision to impose budget cuts in education and health care in order to finance other needs such as Crimea and Sevastopol, the development of nuclear programmes, etc. Despite massive state propaganda on the glorious meaning of the annexation of Crimea, only 16 per cent of respondents accepted giving more budgetary resources to the development of Crimea and Sevastopol. Sixty per cent opposed budget cuts in health care and education as a whole (Levada-Center, 2015j). Russians have in general had a strong position against reducing payments to health care services and education all down the line. From 2002 to 2015, support for abandoning free services diminished from 33-35 per cent to 25 per cent. Accordingly, support for free health care and education has varied from 60 to 76 per cent, ending up at 73 per cent in 2015.

Surveys show unequivocally that people expect the state to take care of their material needs comprehensively, and that the biggest reason for criticism is the government's insufficient care for its social responsibilities. It is not surprising that dissatisfaction with the government's performance has been constantly high. Those who think that governments should be forced to serve citizens' needs better has diminished from a 37 per cent peak in 1999 through 30 per cent in 2012 ending up at 13 per cent in March 2015. Although openly expressed readiness to pressurize the government has diminished, it is still significant that 13 per cent feel deep dissatisfaction and express readiness to force the government to make better politics. We have good reason to assume that the ground is fertile for a quick increase in that kind of criticism, taking into account the long-standing general dissatisfaction with the government's response to popular demands. This has remained at around 50 per cent or more. In March 2015, during the general national euphoria uniting people to support Vladimir Putin and the government, up to 49 per cent of respondents answered that the government has given so little to the people that it justifies them demanding more or even releases them from all loyalty towards the government (Levada-Center, 2015c). These results signify a remarkable alienation of the population and pose a considerable challenge to the legitimacy of the regime, in particular considering the poor economic performance of Russia.

In the longer run, the continuation of the economic recession has the potential to increase criticism and cause difficulties for the regime's attempts to maintain its high level of support. Rose and his co-authors point out that the key factor is the extent to

which people evaluate that the current and future economy affects their living conditions: 'For each one point change in the evaluation of the economy, political support is likely to go up or down by just less than half a point' (Rose et al., 2011: 151).

In summary, we can argue that popular demand for a strong state in material terms means a demand for a state-controlled welfare system. From 2000 to 2015, over 50 per cent of Russians, without much change, have preferred an economic system that relies on state-led planning. Accordingly, support for private ownership and a market-based system has not once exceeded one third of respondents (Levada-Center, 2015c). The model can also be characterized as state paternalism. The argument that the welfare state and a strong state are strongly intertwined is also confirmed by the survey taken in December 2014. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents held that Russia is a superpower and 60 per cent (the largest group of respondents) answered that a high standard of living is the major feature which makes a country a superpower (Levada-Center, 2014). We will return later to the inconsistency of the popular perception of Russia as a superpower and that being determined by high living standards. It seems, however, that the material demand for a welfare state is the most vulnerable part of the regime's policy, and this demand is difficult to replace with any kind of symbolic supply, although there are aspects which tend to neutralize criticism.

Glorious State History

The narration of Russian history follows a traditional universal model to emphasize state history and highlight the role of war heroes. It is constructed of a narrative of the rebirth of the triumphalist state, made possible by individual sufferings of citizens and collective sacrifices of the nation. War narrations on the sacrifices of the nation to defend strictly defined state borders, the nation's common culture, wealth and leadership have been basic state-building and identity-construction instruments of all European nations. Looking back, we see that state leaders have commonly used war narration to reproduce popular consent. Victory Day and the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War is an illuminating example of that, but only one example.

The project to write a common history textbook for Russia is a good example of the state's identity-building. The lack of a consensus on state history has been one of the barriers which hindered Russia from constructing a state and national identity. In discussion on the history textbook project, the openly expressed aim has been to overcome the cleavage between history interpretations: the state's attempt to overcome the gap has been to encompass all achievements in common history which have strengthened state might, regardless of the political system.

In Russia's new history, the emphasis is inevitably on the Great Patriotic Wars in 1812 and 1941-45. The general narration is a drama on how the weakness of the state caused miserable devastation for the country, which the state overcame through national suffering. The catharsis ends up in triumph and a strong state with strong leadership. The lesson is either to keep Russia a strong state with strong leaders or to become devastated by external foes. Victory Day (VD) on 9 May merges competing interpretations of past experiences of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and two dominant conflicting interpretations of the future of Russia. On the one hand, Russia's future is seen to be associated with other great European powers (without the Stalinist "black history") as a continuity of the anti-Hitler coalition and the liberation of Europe; on the other, Russia is seen as a unique Eurasian imperial power continuing its unique historical form of state and political system. Within this frame, Stalin is

understood as a historical necessity, comparable to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great.

The message that the regime has supplied to the public in commemorating VD has always been connected to the changes in the domestic and international situation. During recent years, the emphasis has turned from grief for the fallen people to celebration of the victory of war. In 2015, the first impression of VD is less than before (2010) a commemoration day for millions of fallen people (26% - 18%) but increasingly an official state celebration (26% - 31%). The second feature is that VD is in general respectively perceived less than before as a day for war veterans (23% - 16%), and the way in which it should be commemorated is less connected than before with taking care of war veterans (56% - 49%) (Levada-Center, 2015i). The symbolic significance of VD is perceived as increasingly important, and it is assessed as equal to one's own birthday (42%) in 2015. Only the New Year (80%) and the birthdays of family members and close friends (44%) are rated higher than VD. All other traditional feasts and celebrations come far behind (Levada-Center, 2015i).

The interpretation of Stalin's role in the Great Patriotic War and in Soviet history has deeply divided Russia. This is clearly seen from surveys as well as public discussion. Statists, both Westernizers and Eurasianists, attempt to distinguish themselves from the Stalinist socialist ideology and terror but echo at least to some extent the idea of the strong state as synonym of strong leadership as a prerequisite of the Victory in the war. At the same time, anti-Stalinist liberals advocating a more decentralized state model are pushed into the corner as protagonists of a weak state and at worst as an unpatriotic "fifth column". When asking about citizens' attitudes towards Stalin, surveys show that from 2001 to March 2015, a significant proportion of respondents have had a permanently positive attitude to Stalin. In 2001 they represented 38 per cent and in 2015 39 per cent of respondents. It is worth noting that the positive attitude dropped to its lowest level (31-32%) during Medvedev's presidency and his cautious but consistent attempts to reinterpret the history of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin. The proportion of those who agree that the 'sacrifices of the Soviet people during Stalin's reign are justified by the great goals and results achieved during that time' has increased considerably from 2011-2012 to March 2015, from 25-30 per cent to 46 per cent. Disagreement slumped from 60 per cent in 2012 to 41 per cent in 2015. When the questions concerns Stalin's role beyond the war, the picture changes and the share of negative answers is much higher. Russians do not want to return to a Stalinist society and usually over 50 per cent of respondents connect his name with repression and crimes against people. However, between 2013 and 2015 an apparent turn in perceptions occurred, and the share of those who see Stalin's role in a negative light decreased from 55 to 46 per cent (Levada-Center, 2015l).

The change of attitude towards Stalin's role in history is statistically significant. Without any doubt, it reflects the general atmosphere in Russia, which has substantially turned towards harder and more authoritarian attitudes during the Ukrainian crisis and the conflict with the West. There is also evidence that the politics of history pursued by the state leadership have influenced changes in public opinion. Negative attitudes towards Stalin were at their highest level during the first five years after the presidential term of Boris Yeltsin. During Dmitri Medvedev's presidency and active attempt to redirect popular opinion on Stalin, the proportion of indifferent attitudes peaked, ending up at 38 per cent in 2010. It is still worth noting that negative or positive attitudes did not change significantly during Medvedev's term. The beginning of Vladimir Putin's second term between 2012 and 2014 was the significant turn. It is hard to say to what extent Putin's politics of history and to what

extent the Ukrainian crisis have influenced this turn, but drawing on the general change of attitudes shown by surveys, one might assume that conflict with the West and the Ukrainian crisis have been the decisive factor in recent changes.

President Medvedev's interview in *Izvestiya* on 7 May, 2010 just before the 65th anniversary Victory Day celebrations, can be seen as the Westernizer-statists' last attempt to solve the dilemma of celebrating the Great Patriotic War and utilising it for the idea of a strong state without Stalin's politically counterproductive reputation in the domestic and international arenas (Medvedev, 2010). For the first time since Khrushchev, Russia's head unreservedly questioned Stalin's role as a war hero. Medvedev stressed that Victory Day did not commemorate the victory of Stalin, his totalitarian regime and his generals, but the victory of the people. Medvedev also explicitly denounced Stalin's crimes: 'So despite the fact that he worked hard, despite the fact that under his leadership the country flourished in certain respects, what was done to our own people cannot be forgiven'. At that time, common opinion endorsed Medvedev's statement, since approximately 60 per cent of respondents shared this view in 2008-2012 (Levada-Center, 2015l). Medvedev attempted to distance victory from the Soviet Union – a "totalitarian regime" which pursued its own interests after the War in Eastern Europe – and shifted the credit for the victory to the people and the Red Army, as he worded it. However, Medvedev made a concession to people, mainly war veterans, who still admired Stalin as a war leader, saying that 'admiration and respect is understandable and their right'. At the same time, he made the state's official line clear by not allowing local officials to lay out Stalin's pictures on the streets during the commemoration of Victory Day. This can be seen as a typical example of Statists' attempts to balance Russians' divided popular opinion on Stalin and the Great Patriotic War.

After Medvedev's short "de-Stalinization" period, as the aforementioned survey shows, a significant reorientation began. From 2012 to 2015, those who agreed with the claim that the sacrifices made during Stalin's reign were justified by the great goals and results achieved during that time jumped from 25 to 46 per cent. This definitely says something essential about the prevailing atmosphere in Russia. Putin and the government have trumpeted the demand that people have to sacrifice and suffer from the hardships of Russia's economy before redemption from their troubles will come. This type of view is consistent with public perceptions on state-society relations regardless of their views on history. Furthermore, the surveys also demonstrate a high public demand for the "strong hand" in present-day Russia.

[Figure 3 is here]

However, all of the surveys show that the majority of Russians do not want to return to a Stalinist or even late Soviet type of society: 38% of respondents supported these ideas in 2015. At the same time, in 2014-2015 only 12-15 per cent of respondents believed that Russia is developing towards authoritarianism or a dictatorship. A large proportion of respondents (36-38%) answered in 2014-2015 in a politically correct way that the best characterization of the prevailing political situation in Russia is 'development of democracy'. It is noteworthy that the proportion of unsure respondents who could not or did not want to answer shot up from 21 per cent in 2014 to 30 per cent in 2015 (Levada-Center, 2015c).

Russia's Position in the World: A Great Power

The development of Russia's international relations has significantly affected public opinion about the state. Foreign and domestic policy agendas are always intertwined. This can obviously be seen in both aforementioned cases, Medvedev's interview in *Izvestiya* when he touched on Stalin and Russia's relations with her neighbours and the West, and Russia's current deteriorated relations with the West.

Medvedev's ambiguous attempt was aimed at keeping the reputation of the heroism of the Red Army untouchable but condemning the Stalinist policy in the Soviet sphere of influence. He referred to the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries and its dominant role in the former Soviet bloc after the World War II:

But the historians' art and the ordinary person's common sense lie in the ability to distinguish between the Red Army and the Soviet state's mission during World War II and the events that followed. Yes, this can be very hard to do in real life, but it has to be done. I repeat: without the Red Army, without the colossal sacrifice the Soviet people laid on the altar of war, Europe would be a different place. There would be no prosperous, flourishing, steadily developing Europe today, that is for sure. One would have to be deaf not to heed these arguments (Medvedev, 2010).

The Ukrainian crisis is an illuminating example of how significantly and quickly changes in international relations affect Russia's domestic developments. As Andrei Tsygankov points out, 'the Ukrainian crisis increased the basis of internal support for the state and created conditions for a new consolidation of power'. He also puts forward the common claim in Russia that 'a strong state is necessary in order to improve the quality of Russia's elite and its political system'. The strong state must have a strong role in planning the economy in order to develop Russia's international competitiveness (Tsygankov, 2015: 6). His claim is partly based on the assumption of Russia's distinct and unique development path to modernity (although the other part of the explanation draws from theories connected to Russia's semi-peripheral position in the world economy).

Tsygankov, among others, has defined the current divide in Russian thinking between different orientations (Slavophiles – Westernizers) in which Westernizers have been divided into two groups. One is Liberal (European-orientated) Westernizers and the other Statists (*derzhavniki*), who see Russia's future as a Eurasian state comprising the former Soviet space, including its Asian part. In this respect, the Russian strong state must keep a distance from both Europe and Asia, combining them as a special civilizational world culture, Eurasian Russia. In Russian thinking, the Statists represent a tendency that is closely linked with the "realist school". For realists, international relations are power politics in which a state's might is seen in terms of military and economic capacity, state borders and political leverage. In this worldview, political anarchy is the dominant feature of international relations, which should be resisted by the strong Russian state. With reference to several surveys, this perception seems to be shared widely in Russian society.

In international relations, the perception of strong state appears through symbolic actions accompanying some real political achievements. During recent years, beyond the Crimea annexation, a prominent feature of Putin's policy has been endeavours to gain international recognition for Russia's great power status, symbolic victories and respect. In this vein, one of Russia's largest successes has been the Olympic Games in Sochi. Initially, the reception of the Sochi Olympics by Russians was more or less enthusiastic, but quite soon criticism of corruption, expenses and waste of budget

money penetrated to the surface. Although Russians appreciated Sochi as the most important event, even more important than the collapse of the rouble in 2014 (Levada-Center, 2015a), a small minority, 10 per cent in 2014 and only 5 per cent in 2015, wanted to allocate budget money to any symbolic mega-events (such as Sochi or the Football World Cup in 2018) which aim to increase the state's international reputation (Levada-Center, 2015j).

At the same time, the annexation of Crimea is perceived as proof that Russia has returned at least momentarily to the superpower class. In twenty years, from 1994 to 2014, those who perceive Russia as a superpower has increased from 14 per cent to 68 per cent. In 2008 and 2012, slightly less than half held Russia as a superpower, which means that the post-Crimea jump has been about 20 per cent (Levada-Center, 2014).

There is a clear contradiction in the fact that the perception of Russia's drastically improved international position refers strongly to the Crimea effect, but the annexation of Crimea is still mainly perceived as a symbolic upgrade of superpower status. Most popular definitions of what characterizes a superpower do not meet reality in Russia. Approximately 60 per cent of respondents attach superpower status to a high standard of living, social equality and economic and industrial capacity. Military might (44%) comes closest to the Crimea case as a proof of traditional superpower status as defined in material means, but it meets only weakly people's readiness to improve military capacity (20%). It is not a priority for respondents if the alternative is an improvement in living standards (73%) (Levada-Center, 2014). The only aspect arising from the surveys which supports Russia's superpower status must be labelled more as symbolic than material. From 2000 to November 2014, approximately 65 per cent of respondents have answered that they prefer to live in 'a large country that is respected and sometimes feared by other countries' rather than a 'small, comfortable and non-threatening country' (Levada-Center, 2014).

This shows the extent of the conflict between demand for the material features of a strong state and the regime's mainly symbolic supply which has given a boost to the popular perception that Russia is a strong state.

Conclusions: Modernization Thwarted

We can conclude that in many respects under the surface of the regime can be found several weaknesses, inability to reproduce its capacities, dysfunctional performances of institutions and unintended results of policy. Inconsistency is visible between citizens' essential material expectations of the strong state and the regime's tendency to rely on a symbolic supply of the strong state.

The hitherto symbolic supply of the strong state has barely substituted for a material supply; the regime's diminished capacity to respond to the population's demands for better living standards. Up until now, it has also strengthened the equation of the strong state with the strong leader (strong hand), and the conviction that order and control are more important than democracy and that on an institutional level, the parliament and parties are less trustworthy and supported than the president – namely, Putin (Levada-Center, 2015b, 2015h). During Putin's presidency, almost 70 per cent of respondents have considered that it is beneficial to Russia that 'power is concentrated almost entirely in the hands of Vladimir Putin'. Only 15 per cent answered that this promises bad things for Russia. The demand for a "strong hand" is not only a symbolic demand but one taken literally on the institutional level. Furthermore, although half of respondents agree that Putin is tough enough, as many

as 38 per cent think that he should be tougher. Only 3 per cent think that he is too tough: the proportion is within the statistical error (Levada-Center, 2015d).

After the annexation of Crimea, about half of Russians hold Putin's biggest merit accomplishment to be to 'return Russia to its status as a great and respected world power'. Securing the country's stability comes behind that, and raising salaries, pensions, stipends and allowances is perceived as only the fourth most important achievement (by 29 per cent) (Levada-Center, 2015d). In the same vein, direct anti-democratic sentiments hold strong. Between 1998 and March 2015, a large majority of respondents have held order to be more important than democracy. The fluctuation range of those who prefer order over democracy has been from 56 per cent during the opposition's protests in 2010 to 85 per cent in 2000 after Yeltsin's term. Some of the strongest support for democracy in this survey was measured in 2015: 21 per cent answered that democracy is more important than order. It is characteristic, however, that 61 per cent of respondents preferred order over democracy (Levada-Center, 2015h).

Parallel to the trust in a strong hand, the trust in democratic institutions and law enforcement agencies is at a very low level. Besides the performance of the State Duma being perceived as the worst of all elected institutions (president, government, governors), about half of respondents do not believe that the law protects them. People name three main reasons for this: corruption and unfair and non-objective consideration (45 per cent); citizens are not equal before the law because those in power think that they are above the law and the laws are not written for everyone (44 per cent); and laws are loosely and arbitrary interpreted by those in power (37 per cent) (Levada-Center, 2015g).

The simultaneous distrust in democratic institutions and law enforcement agencies and belief in the necessity of a strong state has significant consequences. The first is the conviction that it is necessary for the regime to draw its legitimacy from a strong leader rather than a democratic system and organized collective interest groups. On the one hand, distrust in institutions and alienation from society leads to cynicism and passivity, and on the other, support for a paternalist system in which the state, its leader and collective institutions have priority over citizens' rights. The concept does not create a favourable environment for the development of western-type modern citizenship and civil society. The second consequence is that Russia is apt to orientate towards narrow modernization, focusing on the material basis of the physical infrastructure, production forces, and efficiency of institutions, which is often understood as obedience to superiors. Citizens do not have a means of influencing societal development and the regime has difficulty getting the necessary feedback and response from the citizens. Citizens' material demands, in particular concerning the welfare state, are responded to asymmetrically: the regime is unable to increase material investments in people's well-being and attempts to replace the deficit with a higher-profile symbolic supply. The annexation of Crimea has served that purpose well, since it has been used by the regime and perceived by the people as the most important achievement of Russia as a great power. For the general public, it has been a real achievement of defending Russia's geopolitical interests and the 'Russian world' – Russians beyond Russian territory. Symbolically it has translated as Putin's manoeuvre to restore Russia's national pride internationally, its recognition as a great power and as a defence of Russian culture and history.

These observations can be concluded by referring to a couple of recent surveys. Although taking into account the political and social pressure to support the state leadership and its policies, the results show the main tendency without question. In

March 2015, the survey shows that the 'accession of Crimea to Russia' was supported by 88 per cent of respondents. The share of those who answered definitely yes was 55 per cent and probably yes 33 per cent. The numbers have been stable from March 2014, even though people have a quite realistic understanding of the EU's attitude. Although 64 per cent believe that the EU will extend sanctions against Russia, the support has not faltered into early 2015. By that time, 72 per cent of respondents answered that instead of finding a compromise with and making concessions to the West in order to get the sanctions lifted, Russia should continue its current approach towards Ukraine, disregarding the sanctions (Levada-Center, 2015e).

It also seems that the weight of the statist's idea of the Russian world has greatly increased during the Ukrainian crisis. As many as 50 per cent hold the opinion that Russia should 'expand its territories to include regions of concentrated Russian-speaking populations'. Only 23 per cent are against and 19 per cent cannot answer. Many Russians have turned their backs on Europe, looking more inward and to some extent to the East as an alternative to the West. Only 21 per cent wanted Russia to join the EU in the foreseeable future, and 20 per cent wanted to become EU citizens. Nonetheless, an increased anti-western mood is not the only possible interpretation of these results. The second plausible conclusion is that the survey reflects citizens' general understanding of Russia's relation with the West and the EU. Furthermore, surveys show that people are quite confused about Russia's orientation and consequently also her state identity. In a referendum on joining the EU or the Customs Union with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, 9 per cent would vote for the EU, 20 per cent did not know, 28 per cent would not vote and 43 per cent were for the Customs Union (Levada-Center, 2015f).

It seems clear that catching up with the European route of broad modernization is out of the question in the near future. Support for the state-led economy and current electoral authoritarian Russian or Soviet type of political system is strong, at 60 per cent. The western type of democracy has never been favoured much, but in 2015 its support slumped to 11 per cent, compared with 32 per cent in 1998 (Levada-Center, 2015k). Since there is no public demand for broad modernization, the Russian leadership does not have any incentive to promote it, particularly if the conflict with the West continues.

References

- Cook, L.J. (2007), *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Diamond, L. (2002), 'Thinking about Hybrid Regimes', *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 21–35.
- Duncan, P. J.S. (2000), *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Gel'man, V. (2015), 'Calculus of Dissent: How the Kremlin Is Countering Its Rivals', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 166.
- Levada-Center (2010a), 'Kak vam kazhetsya, naskol'ko cil'noi ili slaboi yavlyatsya seichas gosudarsvennaya vlast v Rossii?', *Levada-Center*, 1 April, <http://www.levada.ru/archive/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/grazhdane-i-vlast/kak-vam-kazhetsya-naskolko-silnoi-ili-slaboi-yav> (accessed 22.04.2015).
- Levada-Center (2010b), 'Smozhet ili ne smozhet bol'shinstvo lyudei v Rossii prozhit' bez postoyannoi zaboty, opeki so storony gosudarstva?', *Levada-Center*, 1 July, <http://www.levada.ru/archive/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/grazhdane-i-vlast/smozhet-ili-ne-smozhet-bolshinstvo-lyudei-v-ross> (accessed 14.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2010c), 'Na kakom iz sleduyushchih printsipov, na Vash vzglyad, dolzhno byt' ustroeno obshchestvo, v kotorm By hoteli by zhit'?', *Levada-Center*, 1 December <http://www.levada.ru/archive/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/grazhdane-i-vlast/na-kakom-iz-sleduyushchikh-printsipov-na-vash-vz> (accessed 22.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2014), '68% of Russian citizens consider Russia a superpower', *Levada-Center*, 23 December, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/68-russian-citizens-consider-russia-superpower> (accessed 16.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015a), 'Which of these events from 2014 do you think are most important? Events of the year', *Levada-Center*, 12 January, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/events-year> (accessed 15.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015b), 'January 2015 Ratings', *Levada-Center*, 4 February, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/january-2015-ratings> (accessed 14.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015c), 'Grazhdanie, gosudarstvo i vlast', *Levada-Center*, 26 March, <http://www.levada.ru/26-03-2015/grazhdane-gosudarstvo-i-vlast> (accessed 16.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015d), 'Vladimir Putin', *Levada-Center*, 6 April, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/vladimir-putin> (accessed 15.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015e), 'Ukraine, Crimea, and the Sanctions', *Levada-Center*, 15 April <http://www.levada.ru/eng/ukraine-crimea-and-sanctions> (accessed 14.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015f), 'Russian Discrimination in the Post-Soviet Space', *Levada-Center*, 29 April, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/russian-discrimination-post-soviet-space> (accessed 23.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015g), 'Legal Protection', *Levada-Center*, 29 April <http://www.levada.ru/eng/legal-protection> (accessed 14.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015h), 'Ideas about Democracy', *Levada-Center*, 29 April <http://www.levada.ru/eng/ideas-about-democracy> (accessed 16.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015i), 'Velikaya otechestvennaya voina', *Levada-Center*, 29 April <http://www.levada.ru/29-04-2015/velikaya-otechestvennaya-voina> (accessed 06.06.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015j), 'Prioritety byudzhentnykh raskhodov gosudarstva', *Levada-Center*, 2 June <http://www.levada.ru/02-06-2015/prioritety-byudzhentnykh-raskhodov-gosudarstva> (accessed 16.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015k), 'Citizens and the State', *Levada-Center*, 4 June <http://www.levada.ru/eng/citizens-and-state> (accessed 14.07.2015).
- Levada-Center (2015l), 'Stalin', *Levada-Center*, 4 June <http://www.levada.ru/eng/stalin> (accessed 07.06.2015).
- Medvedev, D. (2010), 'Interview Given to Izvestiya Newspaper', *Izvestiya* 7 May, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/295> (accessed 12.02.2015).
- Rose, R., Mishler, W. and Munro N. (2011), *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime The Changing Views of Russians* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press).

- Sakwa, R. (2011), *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Tolz, V. (2001), *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (London: Arnold).
- Tsygankov, A. (2015), 'A Strong State: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century', *Valdai Papers*, N15, <https://ru.scribd.com/doc/265177156/A-Strong-State-Theory-and-Practice-in-the-21st-Century> (accessed June 15, 2015).

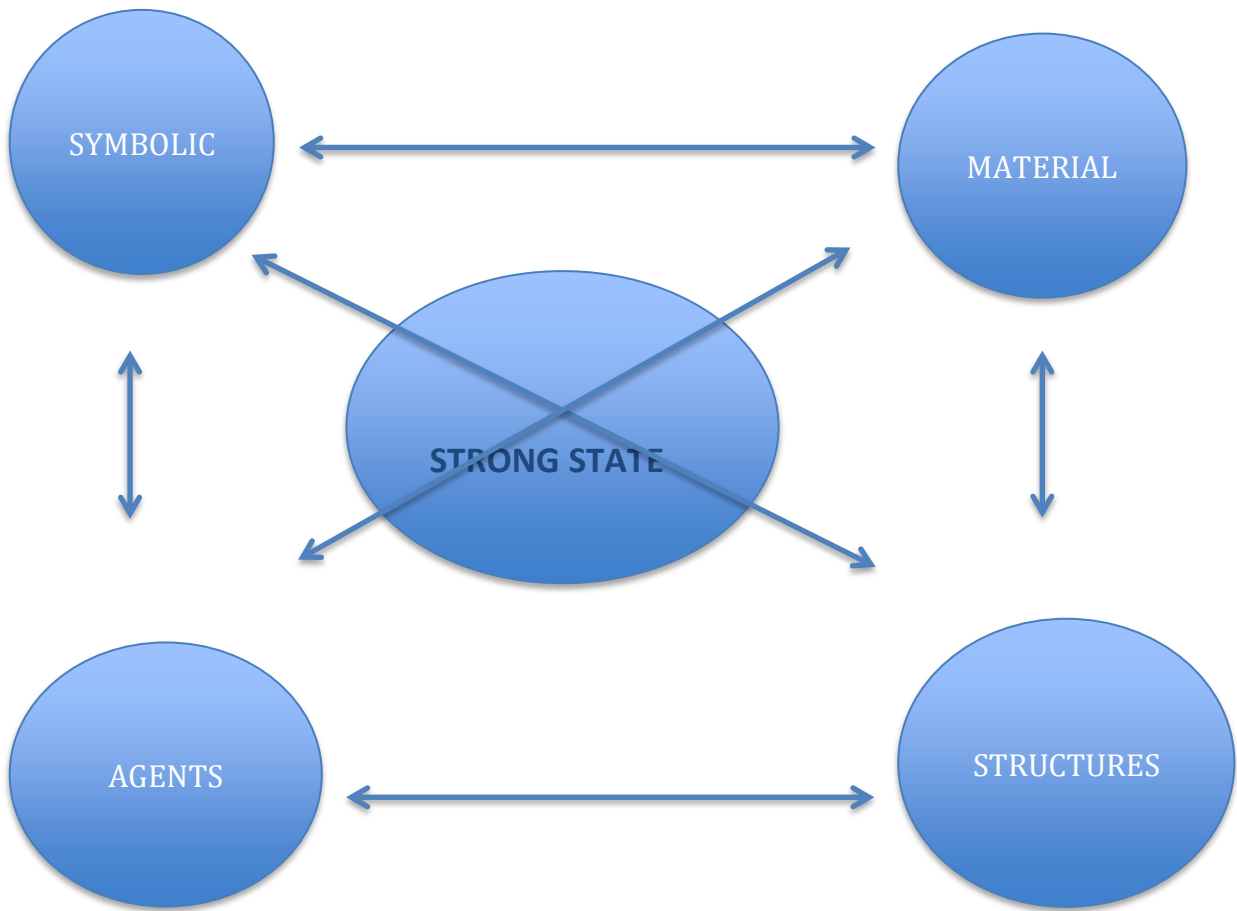


Figure 1 Dimensions of the Strong State in Russia

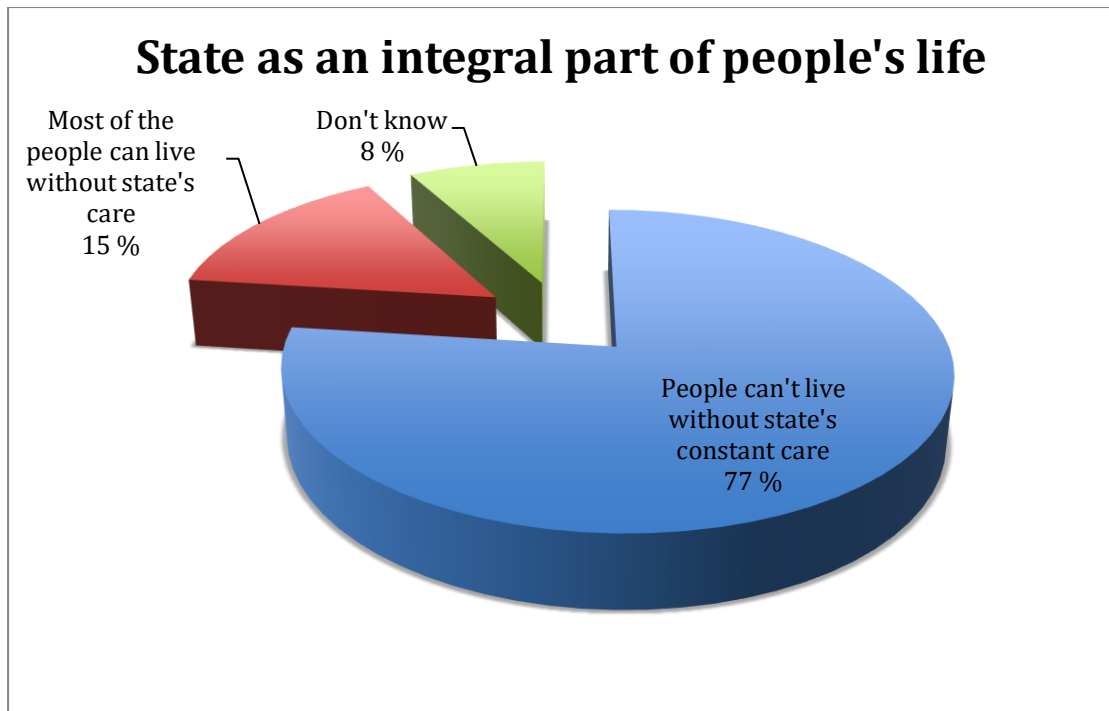


Figure 2 The State as an Integral Part of People's life in Russia (Levada-Center, 2010b)

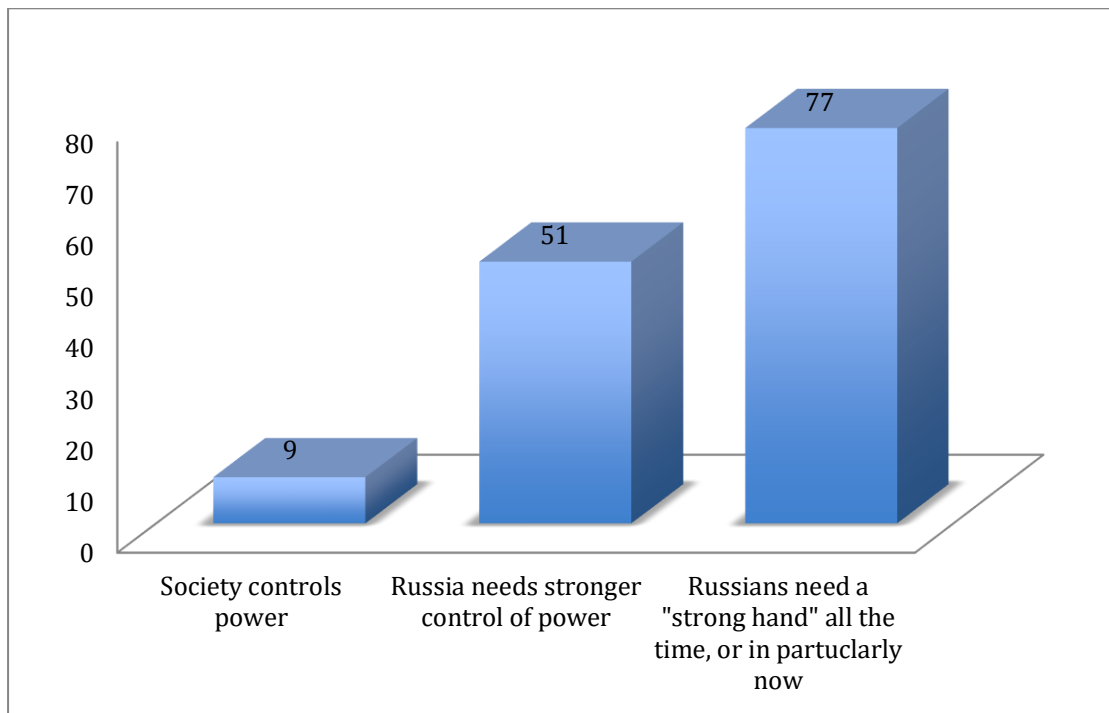


Figure 3 Perceptions of State-Society Relations in Russia (Levada-Center, 2010c)